

THE VOCABULARY OF FAITH

5) Sin

Rev. Ron Dunn

July 17, 2015

Over the past four weeks, we have been examining our vocabulary of faith and the more specific meanings of some of the words that have been a part of that vocabulary. Words like, salvation, belief, freedom and evangelism—all of them loaded with meaning and, in some cases, overloaded with definitions that are not exactly positive and not exactly true to the original understanding.

In order to illustrate this “mixed bag” of meaning that some of these words have generated, we need look no further than this morning’s featured word: Sin. Or, as some would have it, the “S word.”

Now, I don’t think that it is any great secret that some people refuse to include the word, “sin” in their vocabulary of faith. It holds, for them, too many negative meanings or connotations, too many harmful memories of being told in rather vivid terms that they were nothing but “worthless sinners” who would have to change their ways or spend eternal life in hell.

Just out of curiosity, how many of you have experienced this negative impression or image of sin? How many of you, in light of these experiences, find it difficult to use the word “sin” in your own vocabulary of faith?

I am not surprised to see the number of hands that have been raised. To be honest, I share some of your reservations when it comes to using the word, “sin.” When I do choose to use it, I often feel as if I need to explain just what I mean by it—otherwise, people will interpret it in a way that I have not intended.

So it is this morning that I would like to offer my premise that while sin is a word that has often been misunderstood in ways that have been less than positive and helpful, it is still a word that is worthy of a place in our Christian vocabulary. Our task, I believe, is to redefine the meaning of sin and in doing so, reclaim that meaning and that significance in our own understanding of faith.

In our efforts to better understand the meaning of sin, we would do well to consider the biblical story that has, over the ages, served as the metaphor for the human condition in relationship to God. We find this story, of course, in the very beginning of the Book of Genesis and the account of Adam and Eve in the garden. This is a story that is used to explain, in part, just how humanity came to be estranged from God and banished to live outside their original paradise (garden).

It is a story that is not intended to be taken literally, but metaphorically, as a way of understanding *the* human condition and our separation from God. You know the

story...Adam and Eve live in this paradise of a garden with the only restriction being that they were not to eat of the tree in the middle of the garden. If they did so, they were told that they would die. That was well and good for a while, but you know how it is when someone tells you what you cannot do. And so it was that the snake managed to convince Eve that there would be little harm in just plucking one little piece of fruit. **“You will not die,”** the snake told her. **“For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good from evil.”** (Genesis 3: 4-5)

The woman was convinced and proceeded to pluck fruit from the tree and eat. She then shared some of that fruit with Adam who also ate. The story then tells us that the eyes of both Adam and Eve were indeed, opened...and they knew that they were naked, sewing fig leaves together to clothe themselves.

When God comes looking for them in the garden, their new knowledge compels them to hide themselves from God—to little avail. God finds them and they proceed to make their confession that they have eaten the forbidden fruit. Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake, but God was not satisfied. What follows in this ancient story is an explanation of the punishment that all three (Adam, Eve and the snake) will receive because they have disobeyed God’s instructions. Not a very happy or inspiring picture!

But it is, in its own way, a picture of the human condition and our estrangement from one another and from God. Sin, in this understanding, lies in the choice to defy or disobey God. And it is this choice to disobey the will and the way of God that leads to a deep sense of separation or estrangement from God.

So it is that we **find ourselves kicked out of the garden and living, as it were, “East of Eden” as Steinbeck’s novel would have it.**

While sin is a word that has many different connotations and nuances, I would like to suggest that it is often defined by one of two words often associated with it. In his book, “Speaking Christian,” Marcus Borg suggests that one very influential stream of Christian wisdom understands the root of sin as **HUBRIS**, a Greek word, commonly translated into English as **pride**.

He is quick to point out that pride, in this sense, is about more than merely feeling good or proud of oneself. That is, of course, something that we all need. We all need good self-esteem.

But, Hubris is about more than merely having good self-esteem. It is about “puffing oneself up to inordinate size—attempting to become godlike. It has to do with the choice to make oneself the center of the universe and the center of one’s concern. Hubris is the lens used when life becomes “all about me and all about what I want.” In the metaphor of the Adam and Eve story, hubris comes into play when they choose to eat of the forbidden fruit in their effort to become like God, knowing good and evil.

Hubris, however, infects more than merely individual people. It infects groups, countries and yes, humanity itself. A good example of the detrimental effect of humanity's hubris can be seen very tangibly in the ecological crisis that continues to evolve in some staggering and sobering ways. It has become quite clear that humanity can no longer afford to act as if it could live independently at the center of the universe—as if its pleasure and its comfort were the only things that mattered. We now know that this is simply not true and whether or not we will make the needed changes in time remains to be unclear. There can be no doubt, however, that our hubris, the sin of our selfish arrogance, has brought our universe and the fragile web of creation to a crisis point.

Borg suggests that there is a second word that enables us to get our arms around the meaning of sin and that is the word, **"SLOTH,"** another "S" word. Borg contends that sloth is not the opposite of hubris, but is, in fact, complimentary.

The sin of Adam and Eve, you see, was partly motivated by hubris, but also motivated by sloth—the willingness to accept and act upon what the snake told them to do. Their sin, at least in part, can be seen in their willingness to sit back and let someone else choose for them...to just "go along with the flow," to "follow orders," to simply "do what you are told." As theologian and author, **Harvey Cox** wryly observed, sloth essentially means **"leaving it to the snake," just as Adam and Eve left it to the snake.**

When you stop to think about, this sin of sloth, the choice to "leave it to the snake," is one that we can observe in many different forms and varieties—whenever and wherever people choose to allow others to do their thinking, their deciding and their acting for them. How many times do we see examples of people in the news who were just going along with the crowd, just doing what everyone else was doing, just allowing the decision to be made for them? The choice to abrogate our right and responsibility to think and act for ourselves, and then to blame someone else for that choice, leads, invariably to the reality of estrangement or separation from God.

While sin is a word that has many definitions and many expressions, so often it embodies the **hubris** that seeks to puff ourselves up and become greater than we are or the **sloth** that simply acquiesces to the influence and choice of those who would make the choice for us. We don't have to look far to find examples of both hubris and sloth in our current culture.

In his classic book, "Whatever Became of Sin?" Karl Menninger tells the story of a stern faced, plainly dressed young man standing perfectly still on a street corner in downtown Chicago. As pedestrians hurried by, he would solemnly lift his right arm, and pointing to the person nearest to him, would loudly express one word: "GUILTY!" Then, without any change of expression, he would resume his stiff stance for a few moments before repeating the gesture...raising his arm, pointing to a bystander and pronouncing the word, "GUILTY!"

The effect of this strange pantomime and pronouncement on those passing by was unsettling to say the least. They would stare at him, hesitate, look away, look at those they were with and then quickly resume their journey.

One man was heard turning to another and asking out loud, “But how did he know?”

No doubt others entertained similar thoughts. “Yes, I am guilty, but how could he possibly know?”

The truth, of course, is that guilt, like sin, is a given in the human condition. It is part of the fabric of life as we know it and live it. This does not mean that we need to become obsessed with our guilt or obsessed with our sin. This does not mean that we must debase ourselves or devalue ourselves or pretend as if we are “worthless worms” in the hands of an angry God.

No, it simply means that we kid ourselves if we pretend that we are free from the reach of hubris or liberated from the grasp of sloth. We all know what it means to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. We all know what it is like to allow others make certain decisions for us, to simply “go with the flow” of the “way things are.” That does not make us bad people. That does not make us “worthless sinners.” But it does create a certain sense of estrangement that tends to separate us from God and separate us from one another. And that is what sin does—it separates us from God. It alienates us from one another. It removes us from the garden and leaves us on the outside looking in.

I remember well the evening that I was ordained as a deacon in the United Methodist Church, the first step on the road to ordination as an Elder three years later.

Our annual conference was meeting in Stockton for the last time and Bishop Kenneth Goodson from the Virginia Conference was our guest preacher. He was, as I recall, quite a preacher—choked full of southern charm and one story after another.

But what I really remember the most on the warm June evening in Stockton was the words he used to address us as those who were there to be ordained. He said, “You young men and women, stand before us tonight with your college degrees and seminary degrees and all the other honors that you may have attained. And you may be tempted to feel more than a little proud of all that you have accomplished and all that you have attained. And you might be tempted to feel that you have, in some way, earned this moment.”

Then came a pause that lasted for what seemed like a long time...a pause shattered by his pronouncement: **“NUTS TO ALL THAT! YOU ARE SINNERS SAVED BY GRACE!”**

And I can remember the tears welling up in my eyes as the truth of that pronouncement hit home. Yes, I was a sinner—at points alienated and separated from God. But I also knew that my sin would not be held against me—that I had been saved by the grace of God.

Today, forty years later, I realize that these words have been woven into the fabric of my ministry, allowing me to say grounded in the “basics” of my faith. I am a sinner, but a sinner saved by grace.

In a world that desperately wants to convince itself that it has outgrown its need for the word, “sin,” I would contend that sin still has its place of importance—not in its ability to demean or devalue, or make us feel as if we are worthless, but its ability to remind us that, as members of God’s creation, we sometimes find ourselves living “East of Eden,” outside of the garden, alienated, separated and estranged from the God who loves us and the people God has given us to love.

Sin simply points to that reality as it invites us to experience the love and the grace of God that is greater—far greater—than sin itself. Amen.